



2014 WEL NSW ANNUAL REPORT

YEAR OF REVIEW

WEL NSW is an organisation presently in transition. This year, WEL NSW Executive has led a process of review of WEL NSW's operations, aimed at determining what kind of lobby group WEL should become to ensure sustainability and maximise impact over the next years.

An invitation for an Expression of Interest was issued on 3 March to seven consultancy firms with a selection from two which responded. Alt Beatty and Elizabeth Rowe Consulting undertook the review with a final report issued on 4 November 2014.

The review commenced in June and involved extensive consultations, mainly by group and individual interview, and online research into how a range of social advocacy organisations operate. There was a separate Facebook page and an online survey to ascertain what issues are priority concerns for respondents, and the extent to which they are interested in being more involved. This survey drew a pleasing 271 respondents across all age groups.

Pay equity or the wages gap between men and women; low pay in feminised occupations and violence against women, particularly domestic violence, were rated as critical issues. The analysis of this material was presented and discussed in a series of workshops with the WEL NSW executive facilitated by the consultants. The final report represents a blueprint for a revitalised WEL: one of the very few independent, feminist, non-party political lobby groups concerned with a broad range of issues affecting women's participation in society and potential to share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards.

The report urges WEL to:

- create an up-to-date, reliable, authoritative **digital presence with shareable content** to amplify its voice;
- pursue and take up the huge **media opportunities** which now exist to push WEL's two key attributes – speaking for women and advocacy based on accurate information and sound analysis;
- re-establish **WEL's profile** in the political process as well as publicly; expand the number and range of **reliable coalitions, partnerships and alliances**;
- build a reputation for **digestible feminist research** and advocacy and a capacity to spot emerging issues and react quickly.

These are ambitious and demanding aims for action which a small voluntary organisation does not have the capacity or expertise to deliver. WEL needs more volunteers, but, most critically, it needs to hire some paid staff. WEL NSW Executive, in endorsing the consultants' final report entitled **WEL Planning**, will establish an Implementation Group and, as a first step, advertise for a full-time Policy and Campaign Coordinator. This position will be joined by a part-time worker employed to focus on membership engagement and fund-raising.

The Executive will have a dual function of governing the usual work of WEL NSW and concurrently managing and overseeing the transition implementation. There will be Issues Groups established



and Quarterly Members Forums organised and coordinated by the Membership Engagement Coordinator.

The plan for reform and renewal will require the creation of a state of the art multi-media digital platform with a fund-raising strategy to ensure the financial sustainability of all activities into the future. A number of fund-raising techniques have been recommended and WEL must exploit these fully.

Co-incidentally, the premises at 66 Albion Street, Surry Hills, which have been headquarters for WEL NSW for more than two decades are to be resumed by the NSW Government. WEL's office is scheduled to close by 19 December 2014. The Executive is negotiating with the *Older Women's Network, NSW* to share premises in the Carter Evans Centre in Victoria Street, Newtown owned by the City of Sydney. This will involve an office with shared meeting facilities and spaces for other activities. The City of Sydney Council has approved OWN's application for the building with a subsidised accommodation grant. Negotiations have opened on the lease. It is intended that WEL be a sub-lessee.

There were two major areas of campaigning in 2014. One was the **Crimes Amendment (Zoe's Law) Bill of 2013** and the second was the impact of the **Going Home Staying Home** reforms creating new, larger lead agencies for specialist homelessness services absorbing women's refuges or resulting in their closure.

With the Zoe's Law campaign, WEL NSW continued to work with *Our Bodies Our Choice* coalition of community and legal groups and was involved in organising rallies in Martin Plaza as well as protests outside Parliament House. Letters have gone to responsible Ministers and most recently to members of the Legislative Council. The coalition has lobbied MPs extensively and intensively. The Bill, if passed, will have a detrimental impact on the legal understanding of the rights of the foetus, with the effect of creating prenatal personhood and so threatening women's right to abortion. WEL NSW will maintain its firm opposition to the Bill in this current term of parliament and in the next.

With respect to the campaigning on women's refuges, WEL NSW joined with the *Save Our Services* to circulate petitions against the closure of women's refuges and other women's specialist services across NSW. It wrote to the responsible Minister; sought unsuccessfully over three months to have a meeting with her; met with the Deputy Ombudsman regarding the reform process and the monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes; supported other groups at risk of being defunded; prepared and distributed an information paper; attended rallies and vigils; met with key feminists to broaden the base of the protest and prepared a Women's Refuges Campaign proposal for the pre-election period which has been endorsed by Executive.

WEL NSW made a financial contribution to the national *Coalition for Working Women* lobbying to retain the collection by the *Workplace Gender Equity Agency (WGEA)* of gendered data on workforce composition, and in relation to occupations and gender-based access to parental and carers' leave. Melanie Fernandez, Emma Davidson and Kathy McDermott from WEL Australia have contributed to this ongoing campaign. WELA Annual Report of 2014 has more information on national activities.

A submission was made to the *Select Committee on Social and Affordable Housing*, some of the content of which was also used as a basis for a submission to the *Senate Economics Reference*



Committee Inquiry into Affordable Housing. Mary O'Sullivan prepared both submissions and appeared before the state committee on WEL's behalf.

WEL NSW also participated, on the invitation of *Women NSW*, in a reference group for a study of the socio-economic status of women across the life-course.

The Executive met monthly from February with additional sessions scheduled for the WEL review consultations and discussions. Three newsletters were compiled and issued. As well as its campaign and policy work, Executive members attended additional meetings, delivered lectures or spoke to groups on invitation at UTS and Sydney University. It developed policies on Conflict of Interest and Criteria for Consideration of Funding Applications to WEL NSW. These combined with an earlier Code of Conduct policy endorsed in 2010.

WEL's review has highlighted its strengths as an organisation capable of taking a broad independent approach in providing a coherent feminist analysis on issues, and in advocating practical options for change. But the review has also highlighted the critical need to update and refresh the way WEL works. Based on the blueprint offered by the final review report, we must now take some financial risks to ensure this happens.

I submit this report as Convenor for 2014. I am stepping down as Convenor to be able to better support the reform process, the move to new premises and the priorities for WEL NSW's State election campaign.

It has been a productive and also stressful year. With a united sense of purpose, however, and a generosity of spirit and mutual respect for different approaches, marked by a strong feminist commitment, the organisation can re-launch itself as an activist and effective campaigner on behalf of women and social and economic change.

I thank all members of Executive for their contribution of time, effort and expertise to WEL's work on behalf of all members. I thank, in particular, Melanie Fernandez for her work as WELA National Coordinator, Anne Barber for her indefatigable work as Treasurer, Lorraine Slade for Newsletter compilation and maintenance of the office and Laura McLean for her brilliant communications work through the eUpdate and the website.

Jozefa Sobski
Convenor
22 November 2014